

Back-Tracking: A Path to the Future in Regional Japan



Author Adam Fulford

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I periodically lead a “mindful tourism” activity in Tokyo called the Walkshop (www.walkshop.org). Participants typically gather at the entrance to Meiji Shrine, and over the course of about 45 minutes, referring to some East Asian ideas about the “path” or “way”, we stroll through human history in the direction of a better future.

The Walkshop can be held in any location where participants are able to move around together (which is why this workshop is called a Walkshop), but a place commemorating the Imperial couple who presided over the transformation of Japan in the 19th century does offer excellent opportunities to reflect on the march of human progress as we proceed on our journey to the shrine.

By the time we reach the main shrine buildings we have covered a lot of ground, both spatially and conceptually. We have discussed the emergence of language, agriculture, and civilization; considered various tools and forms of guidance that enable us to achieve our objectives; reflected on good and evil, war and peace, nature and culture. And we have contemplated the essential need for a sincere commitment to truth at every step on life’s journey.

It was 1981 when I embarked on my own personal and professional journey in Japan. Along the way, I have formed an idea that Japanese behavior is shaped by what I call “a mind for the other”. This is not to be confused with altruism. There are countless instances of ostensibly altruistic behavior all over the world. In contrast to altruism, “a mind for the other” is based on a strictly utilitarian awareness that it is easier to get something done if you have access to relevant expertise and experience. If we are sensitive to, and can draw freely on, diverse kinds of wisdom, we will be better positioned to identify ways to move efficiently and effectively towards our goal.

I started thinking seriously about the community value of “a mind for the other” in 2014, when I first went to Nakatsugawa, a picturesque village of 280 people in the mountains of Yamagata Prefecture, as a judge for a “beautiful village” contest. Since then I have been working to identify new paths to a thriving future with local residents, and I have come to see regional communities such as Nakatsugawa not just as hidden gems for international visitors, but as points of departure on the path to a future of greater resilience for all of us.

On my walks to Meiji Shrine, I have noticed that people like to keep moving towards a destination. If you come to a dead end on any path, you have to retrace your steps and find a new way forward. But when we perceive that the path to our destination lies open

before us, we resist the idea of going back.

So your first reaction to my main proposal in this article may be to feel that you are being asked to take a step in the “wrong” direction, but I would like you to consider that “back-tracking” in the Japanese countryside is actually a great way for us all to move forward. By retracing our steps — from past to present, from village to city, and (in the case of rural Japan) from sustainability to decline — I think we will discover something of priceless value: a path to a better future.

Who can serve as our guides? Often, it will be elderly men and women, people whose stories do not generally attract much attention. Accordingly, very few people know the Japan that they know: Japan at its cultural source.

The Death of Japanese Culture

The Japanese population is shrinking by hundreds of thousands of people each year. Not enough babies are being born to make up for the annual population loss that results from death, and many small communities around the country now have few or no children. One telling statistic: Japan has more cats and dogs than children under 15.

Hand in hand with that, Japan’s population is increasingly elderly. Already, more than a quarter of the people in Japan are aged 65 and over. Another telling fact: the market for adult diapers in Japan is now worth more than the market for baby diapers.

Meanwhile, Japan’s younger people are generally attached to urban lifestyles. Tokyo is one of the few areas in Japan where the population is (for now, at least) still rising and the economy is strong.

One reason why Tokyo is still so lively is the growing presence of foreigners. Tokyo’s Shinjuku Ward is an extreme example of the city’s internationalization: in January 2018, the percentage of foreign nationals among new adult residents of the ward (those reaching age 20) hit 45.8%. For Tokyo as a whole the figure was roughly one in eight new adults.

Should this demographic trend continue, in a few decades Tokyo will be an East Asian equivalent of London or New York. In such a future, Tokyo may continue to be an outstanding place to live and work — but perhaps only if Japan’s standout qualities, including its excellent service culture, safe streets, low crime, cleanliness, public transport reliability, infrastructure excellence and general civility can

be conserved as well.

Where do these qualities come from? I suspect they are modern urban manifestations of behavior that emerged many years ago in regional Japan. But aging and depopulation now threaten the communities that I regard as the wellspring of Japanese culture.

Local Wisdom

Regional Japan showcases tremendous ecological, biological, agricultural and other forms of variation in a compact land area. Around the country, communities large and small also cope with capricious weather, dramatic seasonal contrasts, natural disasters, climate change, policy decisions and demographic upheaval.

Such kaleidoscopic variety has come to define Japan for me. It is a land of extraordinary regional diversity. Places like Hokkaido and Okinawa stand in obvious contrast to each other. But Hiroshima is also very different from Yamagata. And both of these prefectures are quite distinct from Kumamoto. Kumamoto's Mt. Aso is utterly different from Mt. Fuji. Even within a prefecture, the scenery may change greatly from one area to another.

Depending on where you live, wild boar, deer or rabbits might be the main threat to your crops. In Nakatsugawa, it's monkeys. But just 10 years ago, they had no problem with monkeys.

Seventy years ago, children in Nakatsugawa were still going into the mountains twice each morning to gather hay for the cow that produced manure for the family's fields. By 40 years ago, the cows were gone, the mountain paths were overgrown, and people were using commercial fertilizer on their fields. An understandable change, since that eliminated very hard work. Fast forward to the present day, though, and I find myself wondering if convenience may also have eliminated local identity, or at least undermined it.

The need to clear deep snow in a place like Nakatsugawa makes winter a very demanding season even now. But all over Japan, the toughest parts of everyday life have disappeared as convenience has spread. Professor Ryuzo Furukawa of Tokyo City University sees cause for concern in the fact that people have grown accustomed to ever-greater levels of convenience in everyday life, not just in Japan but in many parts of the world.

Looking at various danger signs for the human race, Furukawa came to think that one day we might all have to cope with *less* convenience. He decided to find out more about how people once lived *without* today's conveniences, and realised that in Japan he was surrounded by experts. He asked hundreds of men and women aged 90 and over about their childhood years in the Japan of the 1930s, when typical life circumstances were anything but convenient. Through their stories, he was able to identify some key factors in making a tough life not just bearable, but even enjoyable.

Furukawa distilled 44 hints for coping in the absence of convenience, and I've found that when I show one or two of these ideas to an older person in a place like Nakatsugawa, he or she will

start talking about what the community has lost. One example: "Ways to help each other".

All over Japan you will find elderly people who can speak about dying customs that once contributed significantly to local community resilience. These customs could be valuable to the future resilience of the *global* community, and to our understanding of how we should behave as members of that community.

As of 2018, Japan has roughly 70,000 people aged 100 and over, so there is no shortage of people to approach. But we have a window of only perhaps 10-15 years to gather the most valuable information. This window of opportunity is short for two main reasons. Firstly, people belonging to generations born *after* World War II grew up in economic, political and social circumstances that were entirely different from those experienced by the generations born *before* the war. Many took advantage of new opportunities to move away from their home villages in regional Japan, and few returned.

This leads to the second reason: even if some younger members of a community have picked up the torch and become experts on local practices, the villages themselves are disappearing. The merging of municipalities and a drop in tax revenues associated with aging and a decreasing population are making it less and less feasible for local governments to serve small, remote villages.

Decline of Japan, Inc.

Here's what one woman in Nakatsugawa wrote (in English) on a "map to the future of the village" that she had drawn: "No people, no leaders, no capital". Nowadays, those words echo in my head as I engage with local communities and explore possible future paths with them.

But those challenges are by no means confined to remote villages. Companies of every size in Japan are finding it increasingly difficult to attract, and then keep, appropriate employees. They have their own "no people" headache, and that pain is likely to intensify as the years go by. With the population decreasing, it ought to be relatively easy for young Japanese men and women to find a job that suits them. But automation and digital solutions are not the only contemporary factors working against that optimism.

Many young Japanese these days are relatively uninterested in studying abroad. Paradoxically, this has come at exactly the time when international experience would seem to offer a huge potential payoff in the context of employment. There will always be room in any Japanese company for graduates of top institutions, but as Japanese markets shrink, and more companies seek profitable ways to engage with markets outside Japan, home-grown employees will increasingly find themselves working alongside (and competing for attention with) cosmopolitan individuals who understand how to get things done in an international business context.

From the viewpoint of company and employee alike, there would seem to be an urgent requirement for expertise in cross-cultural

communication. This is a massive topic with many facets, but here I would like to focus on just one: English language ability. A person who feels comfortable speaking English with people from around the world is ticking off one of the basic requirements of a firm seeking staff who are creative, resourceful, versatile, and sensitive to inclusion.

Wouldn't *any* company want to hire people with those qualities? Especially as employees of that kind might help to address the second challenge: no leaders. The "no leaders" problem seems almost ubiquitous across Japan. Based partly on what I have observed in the regions, I suspect that this phenomenon may arise when the most competent members of a shrinking community become *too busy*. It's a business truism that if you want to get something done, you ask a busy person — the idea being that busyness is an indicator of competence. But beyond a certain point, even an extremely competent person can become so busy that they end up overloaded and incapacitated.

If the "no people" problem could be solved, maybe the "no leaders" problem would be somewhat alleviated. But the "no capital" problem is more intractable. While small communities desperately need new businesses, if no one is willing to invest in a start-up there, the barriers to its success may be insurmountable.

This reluctance to invest strikes me as one surface manifestation of a nationwide fear of risk, and I believe this fear is actually a by-product of the very same "mind for the other" that once served as a solid foundation for community resilience. I will return to this theme later.

NowHow & Win-Win

What circumstances drove so many people in Japan to live in harsh environmental circumstances in small isolated communities? It's a difficult question to answer. But the fact is they did, and in many cases the communities functioned sustainably for centuries.

In a place where snow would fall all winter and starvation was a constant threat, it was vital to know what each member of the community could offer that might boost your own chance of survival, *and* to identify anyone whose actions or attitudes could potentially jeopardize the interests of the group. I suspect that "a mind for the other", both its positive and negative aspects, originated in this pragmatic outlook.

During the Walkshop, I explain that the phrase I use in Japanese for the concept of "a mind for the other" is *aite-wo omou kokoro*. I suggest to Walkshop participants that this thinking has nurtured much of what the world perceives as "the Japanese national character", and I urge them to get off the beaten track and explore regional Japan for themselves. And yet increasingly these days I am finding that they need no encouragement from me; they already have plans to go there. In fact, more and more free independent travelers are venturing beyond Tokyo and Kyoto in search of unique and

rewarding experiences.

It has been estimated that it takes eight foreign visitors to Japan to generate the equivalent consumer spending of one Japanese resident. This makes foreign visitors a vital avenue for generating new flows of money. In many cases, English speakers are in the vanguard of "deep Japan" explorers. This is an especially welcome development for the government and host communities, because long-haul Oceanians, Europeans and North Americans tend to spend more time and money in-country than do travelers making the shorter hop from Japan's neighbors in Asia.

A frequent challenge for visitors to a remote community is the language barrier. In a small village, almost no one will speak English. Moreover, residents of remote locations often find it difficult to know what foreign visitors might want to do in the local area. What many visitors do in fact want to do is go beyond conventional touristy experiences and engage more meaningfully with the host communities. Community-based tourism and "voluntourism" are increasingly valuable aspects of the travel business.

This is where another initiative of mine comes in: it's called NowHow. NowHow is an expression that I came up with to convey in English another deep Japanese cultural value: *ichigo-ichie*. This is a concept from the tea ceremony, and reflects the idea that *now* is the only time when we can do anything; each moment represents a unique opportunity, and so we should aim to make the best possible use of it.

NowHow is an event and an encounter, bringing together three constituencies: local communities seeking access to new ideas that might help them to address the debilitating effects of "no people, no leaders, no capital"; companies seeking employees who are inclusive, resourceful and speak English; and English-speaking visitors seeking rewarding interaction with members of a local community.

NowHow is designed to satisfy all of those requirements. In its simplest form it is a three-day weekend in Nakatsugawa, with a corporate sponsor paying for promising young Japanese employees to learn how to communicate more effectively in English.

On Day 1, the trainees learn what Nakatsugawa has to offer. This involves speaking with members of the community, an activity that also adds to the database of local knowledge that I am building. At the end of Day 1, trainees stay at farmhouse B&Bs, where they learn more about local culture and cuisine.

On Day 2, foreign visitors arrive. So far, I have found various ways to bring English-speaking visitors to Nakatsugawa, but in the future I am hoping that a company such as Terrie Lloyd's Japan Travel will be handling this part of the business. The trainees show the foreign visitors around in English.

Then on Day 3, the trainees and the foreign visitors brainstorm the future of the community. To get a sense of what these weekends are like, please access the video via the QR code under the photo of the trainee (*Photo 1*). This still image is from Day 1, when the trainee

Photo 1: Matt Schley (image from video)



I'm feeling the tension a bit.

A nervous trainee on Day 1 of NowHow. (Please use the QR code to see a 5-minute video about the event.)



Video: Matt Schley

seemed convinced that he could not communicate in English. In the video, however, you will see that within two hours of meeting the English-speaking visitors on Day 2, he is confidently showing them around the local biomass plant.

Local festivals are one focus of the Day 3 brainstorming sessions. Nakatsugawa has snow festivals in the summer and the winter. The winter festival in particular involves a lot of lifting, assembling and digging — activities demanding the energy and stamina that young people typically have in abundance. So for the last two years I have been arranging trips for groups of about 10 university students from Tokyo to take part in the winter snow festival as volunteers. (They also spend several hours clearing snow from around an elderly person's home.)

NowHow activities and brainstorming sessions have resulted in various ideas for souvenirs and local products that can be sold to generate travel funds for these students. One popular item these days is coffee that has been matured in Nakatsugawa's snow storehouse (*Photo 2*).

My aim in 2019 and beyond will be to continue to use Nakatsugawa as a springboard for the nationwide implementation of the NowHow initiative. What I have done there has already made it possible for me to start considering similar activities in Kumamoto and Hyogo prefectures, but my ultimate aim is to access knowledge of practices that will help us identify new paths to regional well-being around Japan.

I believe this knowledge may one day benefit people in communities around the world and also in larger Japanese communities, such as Tokyo. Since WWII, urban Japan has come to suffer from a negative aspect of "a mind for the other". Many sedentary Tokyoites dwell on how they are seen by others, a

Photo 2: Adam Fulford; illustration: Jasmine Fulford



Limited edition coffee (coshall.stores.jp) that has been matured in a snow storehouse in Nakatsugawa. Profits help to cover the travel costs of student volunteers supporting the winter Snow Festival.

tendency that may have been exacerbated by social networking platforms. The result, however, is that people end up choosing the path of (perceived) least risk and greatest group conformity, rather than taking active steps to engage with others and improve life for everyone.

In the years ahead, Tokyo will almost certainly become a cultural melting pot. But by then, the locations where the true diversity within Japanese culture can currently be experienced will mostly be gone. We will have only big cosmopolitan cities and a number of bland (but also increasingly cosmopolitan) regional cities and tourist resorts where the unique life experiences and practices that used to exist in each area have faded to vague memories. The smallest communities may no longer exist.

This is why, in a related initiative that I plan to advance beginning in 2019, I will be aiming to showcase in the heart of Tokyo the distinct identity of different regions of Japan, a city that I am hoping will one day be regarded as the world's top destination for local cultural conservation and global cultural interaction.

But to reach that point, first we must back-track to the Japanese countryside and explore the many opportunities there to access the past, present and future. There are very few risks on this path and numerous potential rewards, so let's get walking. Now. **JS**

Adam Fulford is CEO of Fulford Enterprises, Ltd., and has lived in Japan for 37 years.